

Tackling Tough Questions: What to Say In Q & A

By Dianna Booher

Have you ever watched a colleague wrap up a fabulous meeting, field a few questions with flair, and then, just as they're ready to wrap up, you see another hand waving from the end of the board room. "So, Bob, everything you've said so far makes sense, but could you explain how this protocol could have been effective with that situation in production last week?" Unprepared for this curve ball, you watch as Bob stammers and stutters next to his pie charts, with an incoherent ramble that turns an otherwise star performance into a show-stopper.

Public speaking is a common fear among those in the business sector for good reason. No one likes to be peppered with questions for which they are unprepared. What's a major key to minimizing that fear? Preparation.

Here are a few practical tips for preparing for question-and-answer periods, particularly when you expect difficult questions from skeptics.

Hypothetical

Often when people ask a hypothetical question, they have an agenda—they are looking for a forum to express their own opinion. Whatever answer you give will be "wrong," and they will change the details about their hypothetical situation and proceed to set you straight about what will or will not work.

Tip: Sidestep the Details

Refocus by responding, "There are so many unknowns and variables in hypothetical cases that it's difficult to give a meaningful response to that situation." Or: "I prefer to stay focused on the current mission in formulating policy for our charitable contributions. For the present situation, I still consider. . ."

Tip: Probe for the Real Issue and Address That Concern

Examples: "Is your concern in raising that question the safety issue?" If the audience member confirms that the safety issue is what prompted the hypothetical situation, then you can proceed to comment in general on the safety issue rather than getting bogged down in hypothetical details.

Show-Off

Generally, this "question" is a monologue—either an opinion or a barrage of data. Then, after the dump, the asker tacks on a limp question at the end, such as "Wouldn't you agree?"

Tip: Call for the Question

Example: "Would you please restate your question?" or "Were you just stating an

observation, or is that a question?” After some fumbling, the participant may or may not come up with a question that you can answer briefly and use to regain control.

Tip: Acknowledge the “Comment” and Move On

Examples: “Thank you for that observation.” “Good information to have.” “You sound as though you’ve had some experience with similar situations.” “I’m sure others may feel as you do.” “That’s something else we may want to consider in the decision.” Break eye contact, and move on.

Hostile

People ask hostile questions for any number of reasons: (1) They disagree with what you have said or have wrong information. (2) You have not established credibility with them. (3) They have misunderstood you. (4) They think they are “saving the day” for their organization. (5) Their personality makes them always look for the cloud in every silver lining. (6) They have a hostile tone and facial expression without realizing it. (7) They are angry with someone else and are taking it out on you—consciously or unconsciously. (8) Their question is neutral, but you have had a bad day and are “reading hostility into the question.”

Tip: Rephrase a Legitimate Question Minus the Hostile Tone

If the question is, “Why are you demanding six years of experience for all subcontracted work? I think that’s totally unreasonable,” rephrase it: “Why do we think six years’ experience is necessary? Well, first of all. . . .” Don’t feel that you have to refute an opposing view in great detail, particularly if the hostile view is not well supported. Simply comment: “No, I don’t think that’s the case.” No elaboration is necessary. Your answer will sound authoritative and will make the asker appear rude and argumentative if he or she rephrases and continues. Avoid matching hostility with hostility.

Tip: Acknowledge and Accept Feelings

By acknowledging and legitimizing the feelings of the asker, you may defuse the hostility and help him or her receive your answer in a more open manner. Examples: “It sounds as though you’ve been through some difficult delays with this supplier” or “I don’t blame you for feeling as you do, given the situation you describe.”

Tip: Agree with Something the Questioner Has Stated

If possible, try to find something within the hostile question with which you can agree. This typically diffuses some of the inclination to argue with whatever response you provide. Then give your answer.

You can expect virtually every high-level presentation to include a Q & A session as part of the agenda. This is not something to fear—think of it as just one more component for which to prepare and to use to win over your audience. By learning these Q & A tips you’re already ahead of the game.

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For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.